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ABSTRACT

This paper, a commentary on W.W. Gage's article "Uncommonly Taught Languages" (AL 002 524), attempts to stress other aspects than those treated by Gage and points out the practical and technical needs of those interested in the field. The author views the goal of the study of uncommonly taught languages at the understanding of other peoples and states that: "Uncommon languages offer the best area for the testing of hypotheses regarding semantic universals and for the development of constructs to handle the bundling of semantic motifs. In these areas lie our hopes for laying the bases for inter-cultural understanding." In considering existing materials for these langauges, the author expresses his view that, although individual materials may be inadequate, the totality of materials contain information which could be quite useful if properly utilized, and suggests how the more effective use of materials could be achieved through a centralized self-correcting data bank. Also discussed are difficulties involved in the production of reference grammars and the study of language relationships and language history with regard to the uncommonly taught langauges. (FWB)

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RESPONSE TO W. GAGE'S ARTICLE UNCOMMONLY TAUGHT LANGUAGES

by

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Response

The Gage report is succient and informative. It brings into focus a number of the problems involved and should be widely distributed. It is obviously written by one with a deep concern for the field. At the same time each of us who feels he has such concern sees aspects of the problem which Gage has not stressed. This becomes almost a personal matter, so that the remarks I feel I should make are not a criticism of Gage but rather my own variety of concern, those things about which I feel most deeply.

This 'feeling' is perhaps most evident on the more general, almost philosophic, aspects of the problem. At the same time, however, I also have strong views on the practical. My remarks are therefore divided into a more philosophic 'appeal' and practical comments.

Gage mentions the language and area dichotomy, reflected in the whilom anthropologist-linguist rivalry. This raises the question as to the purpose of the study of uncommon languages. In my view the goal is the understanding of other peoples. What the user of ERIC or any other set of data on foreign peoples needs to realize is the vastness of the problem of understanding any one people and the varying types of contributions made toward this end by the materials available. In his discussion Gage reveals his concern for this problem and puts priority on what may be called the general introduction. He apparently does not feel that it is

necessary to categorize the various contributions beyond the general NDEA list.

This, however, goes immediately into what I would term the 'practical' aspects of the problem, which I wish to defer for the moment. In-depth understanding is not the goal of the vast majority of materials produced. It is, indeed, difficult to grasp the concept. In-depth understanding of whom? a tribe? a nation? From a linguistic point of view the answer is simpler than from the area point of view. It is understanding of those sharing a common (native) language. This goal is not an overt one in the linguistic literature, nor should it be. It is inherent in any study of language, though marginal to many.

Viewed thus sub specie intelligentis, the published flow of materials on uncommon languages is in most cases very disappointing. Traditional literary and philological studies have not had the rigor in their humanism necessary to make profound analyses. Linguistics has been more concerned with form than with content. Strangely enough, the real hope would seem to lie with semantics, and from this angle there is yet little which would help us. Uncommon languages offer the best area for the testing of hypotheses regarding semantic universals and for the development of constructs to handle the bundling of semantic motifs. In these areas lie our hopes for laying the bases for inter-cultural understanding. My 'philosophic' aspect has a very practical application.

Turning to the 'practical' side of the situation, by which I mean the utilization of existing resources, Gage has, as mentioned, stressed the need for good general introductory materials. One cannot disagree. One

may, however, suggest that the interim materials might be more effectively used than they are. The historian, the geographer, the economist, the art historian, etc. who wishes a more up to date statement on, say, the Ijo may find an excellent survey in Williamson's work on that linguistic group. It is likely, given the bibliographic and other aids we have today, that he will find it. There are, however, bits and pieces scattered through the literature which contribute to a more accurate picture than one can get from the general handbooks. Would it be feasible to provide a kind of self-correcting data bank for what may be called the encyclopedic kind of information? The Voegelin-Voegelin volumes would serve as a base list of names. For each language the latest data would be supplied by a page or pages from an article or book, to be replaced by a more recent item as soon as one is available. Thus for Ijo the relevant pages from Williamson would be entered, for others Westermann and Bryan would be the latest.

While this would appear to be an enormous undertaking, the most important aspect of it is the keying into it of materials already being handled. An abstract would automatically contain an indication as to whether the item made a contribution to the encyclopedic data list.

This kind of coverage could be broadened to include more handbook data. In fact, an outline could be provided, such as:

Language name(s)
Place(s) spoken
Number of speakers
Cultural role (primary language, secondary, local, primary alternate, etc.)
Linguistic affinity
Grammatical sketch
Historical sketch (of language)
Literary history

Selection of a reliable source for each of these would be made, where it existed. All material would have to be understandable to the general edu-

cated reader, presumably a student or scholar in another field. Caution would need to be shown with regard to language affinity where considerable disagreement (or dissatisfaction) exists.

Even if this plan as a whole is not adopted, the keying of currently processed material into such a matrix would be of great value.

It is, of course, obvious that the scholar at a major university with excellent library facilities could perform this task for himself. It is also obvious that at the present time interest in foreign areas is far more widespread than are such library facilities. The existence of an information pool, accessible to any library in the country, with the possibility of ERIC type accessibility, would, I think, be a very useful thing. Objections might be raised by the makers of encyclopedias, though of course good encyclopedia articles would be part and parcel of the pool.

This project, however helpful, is still on a very elementary level from the linguistic point of view, nor would it serve our purpose of in-depth understanding. Current bibliographic efforts are, however, increasingly effective in offering the scholar recent if not up to date information on what is being published. The users of this material are, however, still very diverse. Considering only the in-depth users, we have two dominant types - the one who wishes to learn the language well in order to use it in his work and the one who wants detailed linguistic information for the purposes of linguistic analysis, description or comparison. The obvious needs are for one a basic course, intermediate and advanced materials, with dictionary; for the other a detailed reference grammar and dictionary.

The production of basic courses has been going on apace but not so the detailed reference grammar. There is, in the first place, no generally

accepted linguistic model for such. The transformational generative approach is in more constant flux than prior models. It has, however, produced some useful grammars of uncommon languages, though the format is too forbidding for the general reader and most other students of the language. This is true of some other approaches, also, and the problem of informative presentation is yet to be solved. It is basically a problem of data-orientation vs. problem-orientation. While data-oriented material is in lesser repute recently, there can be no problem solving without data and some common ground of data presentation needs to be found. The basic course and succeeding materials fill this gap to some extent but are by definition not grammatically exhaustive.

While the study of literature would, though relevant, take us too far afield, the study of language relationships and of language history must be included. While the amount of data now available is considerable, much more is needed to solve some of the most knotty problems. A general survey of present knowledge of African languages would be a useful first step in approaching the problem of linguistic affinities in that continent. Considerable unpublished materials exist which could be brought to bear on the problem. This is not to say that nothing is being done. Quite the contrary. The Linguistic Survey of Ethiopia alone is a project producing new nuggets of knowledge. However, not even a current map of African languages is available (though David Dalby of SOAS has been working on such). This would appear a great desideratum, though it would of necessity be preliminary in nature.

There are recent milestones in the field of comparative linguistics dealing with uncommon languages, such as Malcolm Guthrie's monumental work

on Bantu. The field is so large, however, that large areas are relatively untouched, and much of the work is of a very preliminary nature. The situation emphasizes the need for comparable data-oriented grammatical and lexical studies of individual languages which can be meshed into larger studies until the ultimate families and phyla are determinable.

In dealing with the history of lesser known languages one needs to be reminded of the untapped resources. A recent project now well under way is microfilming the libraries of European monasteries (Monastic Manuscript Microfilm Library, Saint John's College). Earlier libraries at Sinai, Jerusalem and Mt. Athos have been the subject of expeditions. The world resources still in manuscript or relatively inaccessible printed books is enormous and ranges from Buddhist materials on Korea to Arabic and other documents in West Africa. How to make the collections available, at the same time protecting the rights of those who presently have charge of them, is an ever more pressing problem. On the other hand, the collection of oral data has received considerable and well-deserved impetus.

These comments on the comments of Mr. Gage have purposely put stress on other aspects of the field, pointing out the practical (including 'statistical') and technical needs of those interested. In conclusion one might ask whether, despite all of the effort expended, we are really covering all the available resources. A great deal of technical linguistic material has been circulated in preliminary form to those interested in theory. This has been true to some extent of materials on uncommon languages, particularly in the case of government-sponsored projects and CAL and ERIC have helped enormously to make these known to the general public.

It is also true, however, that a great deal of material in preliminary form exists on many lesser known languages. It has been reported of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, for example, that far more exists in files than can possibly be published under existing conditions. It is not to be thought that all such materials should be published, but it may reasonably be asked if such collections are catalogued or otherwise retrievable. A notable exception to inaccessibility is, of course, the Language Files of the Center for Applied Linguistics.